

From the Place of the Bad Woods
by P. L. Sperr

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A Lumbering Operation Right in the City of New York, Recalling Forest Events of the Revolution

BY P. L. SPERR

"MONOCKNONG—The Place of the Bad Woods," is said to have been one of the Indian names for Staten Island. Here shipbuilding began in prehistoric times when the Indian secured a log and made himself a water craft by hollowing it with fire. When the final sale of the island to the Whites was made in 1670, the Red Men reserved the right to two kinds of trees. Quite a ceremony was made of that sale. The Indians "presented a sod and a shrub or branch of every kind of tree which grew upon the island, except the ash and elder—some say the ash and hickory." They thereby indicated that they had transferred all rights, excepting to the trees which they had reserved, and it has been claimed that they exercised the right to gather these woods for their boats and baskets down to the close of the colonial period.

Perhaps it is not surprising that shipbuilding should continue to be a

Staten Island industry although the place is now one of the five boroughs of the City of New York, but who would suppose that timber for the ships would still be cut there?

The ancient forests were called on for homebuilding and shipbuilding materials, and for firewood, by the colonists. In places they were cut down ruthlessly to clear the land for cultivation. Even worse were the cuttings due to British demands during the War of the Revolution. Much wood was used for building the

barracks and defenses of the soldiers who occupied Staten Island, but the need of firewood caused the greatest destruction of the old timber. The forces and civilians in New York, as well as the garrisons on the island, had to be supplied with fuel. So much cutting was done to fill these needs that a traveler early in the last century wrote:

"No part of the wood in Staten Island, on Long Island, or within any inconsiderable distance from New York, is of great size, the British, during their occupation of New York in the Revolutionary War, having cut down for fuel all the wood within their reach."

How some of this cutting was managed is told in the "Reminiscences of David M. Van Name:"

"Moses Van Name was my grand-father and during the Revolutionary War, he was called upon by an English officer to obey the order of Sir William Howe. During his en-

campment on Staten Island, the people had become so terrorized by the treatment of the English soldiers, they were willing to consent to most any request, not for love but for fear. Winter approaching, soldiers in camp, they needed fuel. An English officer was commissioned to call on the farmers or captains who owned wooded tracts, each to cut so many cords of wood and deliver it to be placed on my grandfather's vessel to be delivered at quarantine.

"They dared not refuse, expecting no returns for



YES, THIS IS LITTLE OLD NEW YORK

Full view of the portable mill in operation in real woods on Staten Island. In the foreground is the skidway of poles on which logs are rolled on to the carriage, which takes them to the saw.



LOGS READY FOR THE MILL AT ELTINGVILLE

It was on Staten Island that the British, during the Revolutionary War, forced the Colonial settlers to destroy the forests to supply their soldiers with firewood. The forest above is probably the third crop of trees to grow on the land.

their wood and labor. After the delivery was complete, one of the officers asked my grandfather if he would like to have some money. Imagine the surprise by such an interrogatory. He was delighted to answer in the affirmative. So the commissioner gave him an order to go to the city of New York at a certain building of business conducted by the English government at the present Bowling Green.

"So one fine day he set sail for the city; with his order he entered and was ushered into the banker's office. Such a sight as never to be forgotten by him. Gold piled on a table uniformly in rows, representing stipulated amounts in each pile. The banker in charge took a large knife and placed it between rows and put it outside, which constituted the value of the order. The officer commanded my grandfather to put it in his hat and to count it when he got home, and divide it among his neighbors in proportion to the wood furnished by each, and take out for his services in delivering. Rejoicing fell on the lips of all."

Mention is again made of the firewood cut on Staten Island in connection with the raid by the Americans under Lord Stirling. The invasion was made on a bleak, wintry day, and when the Continentals came upon piles of

cordwood, cut for the British, they got some comfort out of burning it themselves.

There were profiteers in those days, too, and during the hard winter of 1779-'80 prices went sky-rocketing. The result was a series of proclamations from the British governor of New York, limiting the charges. One, for instance, set the price of "walnut cordwood, or any other kind of wood" at four pounds per cord. There were also proclamations calling for the delivery of wood, and the governor must be credited with an order against cutting from the estates of people "supposed to be in rebellion."

With all this cutting, there may scarcely be a tree on the island which dates to the time when the Indians sold The Place of the Bad Woods to Governor Lovelace; and yet from time to time somewhere on Staten Island there is a lumbering operation of considerable size. For over a quarter of a century, Staten Island has been a part of the City of New York. It is the Borough of Richmond. Still there are none of the appearances of the metropolis, and no greater contrasts could be found than in the development of the two islands, Manhattan and Staten. The building of ships continues to be one of the chief industries of the latter and as late as last summer her own forests yielded some of the best oak for the vessels and



UNLOADING LOGS FOR THE MILL ON STATEN ISLAND

The trees were cut within a few miles of New York's subway. There were thirty acres of woodland, with a fine growth of timber.

docks. Down in the south central part of Staten Island, near the town of Eltingville, the loiterer might have seen the picturesque sights of a lumbering operation from the early Spring to the late Summer of 1924. There are some beautifully forested areas in that section. Perhaps the best and most famous are the Woods of Arden, stretching from Eltingville along Richmond Avenue towards the coast. The present operation was on the opposite side of the town. The place known locally as "the Banker's Woods" was to be cleared for a real estate development. In wet weather the land was marshy, and a little creek, called Betty Holmes' Brook, began there to babble along under Richmond Avenue and through other woods until it found its way into the Fresh Kills. Children of the neighborhood picked the wild azalea blossoms there in the Spring, and passing motorists may have broken off branches of brightly colored leaves in the Autumn. Otherwise the land had gone uncropped for many years. The conservationist may get something out of the fact that in that time it had produced a second or third growth of good timber.

A queen bee, having no thought that things would not go on forever as they had been, brought her swarm to a hollow tree by the roadside. The honeymaking had just begun when the lumbermen appeared. Most of



TIMBER KNOWN AS "FLITCH"

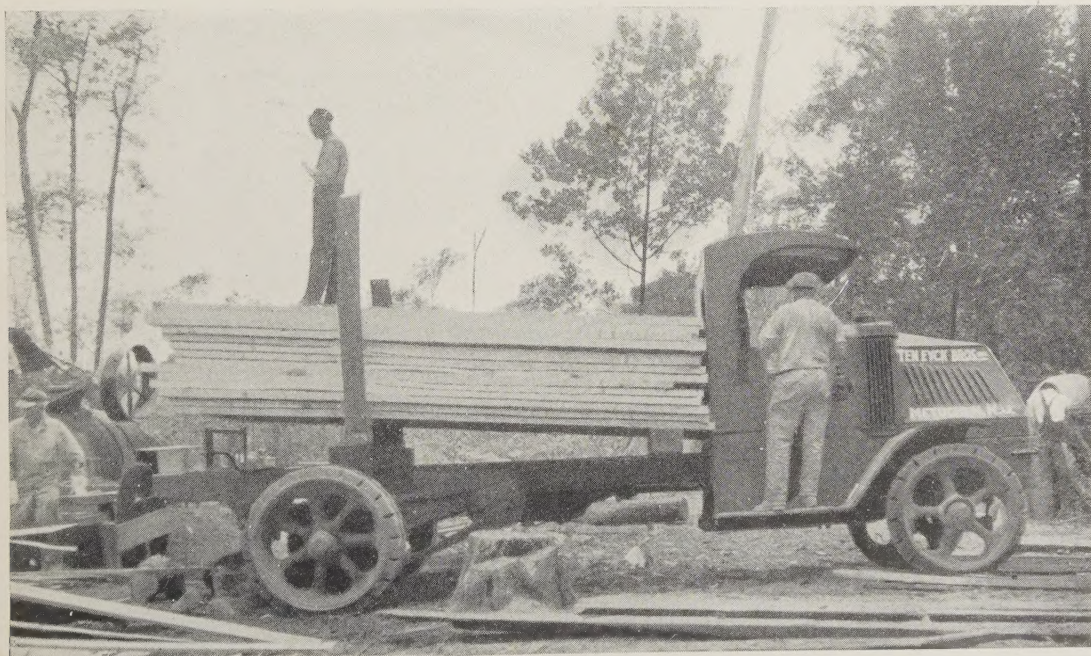
This is suitable for shipbuilding and in great demand. These curved pieces are needed for the stern gunwales of boats.

the birds arrived a little later and, seeing what was going on, built their homes elsewhere. A catbird did some scolding about the matter, and the bees were vehemently angry when finally evicted, but most of the inhabitants moved along with the stoicism with which old residents generally accept the "improvements" which hinder their accustomed ways. Indeed, six squirrels were seen having a final frolic on one of the big trees before moving along.

The land was now in the hands of real estate men. Hopes of subway connection with Manhattan via Brooklyn, had brought a boom to Staten Island. It seemed time to clear and "develop" the property, and the woods had therefore been sold to the lumbermen.

There were thirty acres of the woodland, and it had a fine growth of timber. Approximately 100,000 feet of sawed lumber, besides a large number of poles and a quantity of firewood, was the estimated yield.

From ten to a dozen men were busy for several months on this work, cutting trees, hauling out the logs, milling the lumber, and trucking the planks and firewood. Two axemen were employed at felling the trees, trimming off the branches, and cutting the trunks into proper lengths. The logging required three teams of horses with their drivers, and four or five men did the work around the



LUMBER FOR EXPORT

The second smaller of two trucks of oak planking cut at Eltingville, on Staten Island, which was shipped to South America.

portable mill which was set up over at the edge of the woods. As fast as the lumber was cut up it was delivered to one customer or another by a 10-ton truck.

The variety of the timber and its uses was interesting, particularly when one was reminded that it was taken from within the city limits. The wood was principally oak—white oak, red oak, yellow oak, pin oak, and black oak; but there was also hickory, sweet gum, poplar, and beech.

Staten Island shipbuilders took most of the output, and they were delighted with the quality of the white and red oak.

"The best oak that we have had in years!" one exclaimed.

It seems that oak from this vicinity, known as Jersey White Oak, stands in special favor with the shipbuilder. It commands a price \$20.00 per thousand feet higher than the southern oak, and he is willing to pay the difference. The lumbermen have a theory that the climate gives the wood a better quality, and they mention the salt air of the sea as a possible cause. At any rate, Jersey Oak has this prestige, and the Staten Island wood ranks with the best of the Jersey Oak.

From these woods came oak planking for the sides and decks of the ships; and lighter boards, sometimes rather shaky, which would do for the sheathing and dunnage. Heavy timbers were cut which would probably make the buffers along the sides of car floats or other scows, placed there to take the rubbing from tugs and docks. Some of the logs were sharply curved. Such crookedness did not detract from the value of the timber. The shipbuilder requires wood of that sort for fashioning the stern gunwales on tugs and other boats—"The more crooked, the better," declared one of the lumbermen. The only trouble here was that the portable mill could not handle logs with quite such curves as the boat builders would like to have. The saw was not large enough to trim the sides.

The oak planking was used for docks as well as ships. Likewise, the oak poles were sold to dock builders. A large number of the trees were too small for sawing into planks, but made good poles. Such poles are always in good demand, even when the market for other timber is poor. They are used in large numbers for piles, and they look rather picturesque when seen at the ferry slips.

Shorter poles of oak and hickory were sold to a Boston contractor for use as piling. When the pile has been driven pretty well down, a short pole is placed between it and the head of the driver to force it further.

The beech, hickory, tulip and sweet gum lumber from this operation was also sold to shipbuilders, but these woods might have gone to people who had special needs for them. The hickory might have gone to a manufacturer of tool handles, for instance, and the tulip to a maker of veneer. The beech might have been turned into dye paddles. It is said that not every wood can be employed for this purpose, for the juices of most kinds discolor the dyes used in the textile industry. Beech paddles are safe, however.

"There is a special purpose for practically every wood, and very little needs to be wasted nowadays," said one of the lumbermen. "We could even make use of the little locust trees along the road there. They could be cut into two by two pieces and sold to a maker of policemen's sticks. When dry, the wood of the locust is very tough and hard. It makes a fine nightstick."

Yes, even the sawdust might have been put to use. There are several companies in and around New York which make a business of nothing but sawdust. Sometimes it is shipped in from considerable distances, and sometimes it is manufactured expressly for a purpose. The uses range from the sprinkling of butchers' floors to the polishing of pearl buttons. The oak sawdust from the cuttings on Staten Island might have been sold at a good price to the furriers, who would use it for the tanning of fine furs, but it would have been necessary to keep the dust entirely free from bark.

With all the many and varied demands of the city for wood, from the building of docks and skyscrapers to the stuffing of dolls, as the climax of oddities comes this: From these same cuttings in the Borough of Richmond, a share of that high class oak planking was exported. Nor did this material go to the cut-over or devastated regions of Europe, but down to South America. Several thousand feet of 2-inch oak planking was shipped by one of the oil companies to Maracaibo, Venezuela, for the building of its docks.

And thus it may be recorded in some atlas of the antipodes that "in the boundaries of the City of New York there are forests which produce a variety of timber, including the best grade of oak. Local uses are supplied and a quantity is exported!"

NEW HAMPSHIRE MEETING

The Society for Protection of New Hampshire Forests will hold its annual meeting on September 2, 3 and 4, at Camp Allegro on Silver Lake, Madison, New Hampshire. Silver Lake is in the White Mountains and just east of Mt. Chocorua. The program of the meeting includes a number of important forestry questions, among them cooperation in the passage of the McNary-Woodruff Bill; forest and recreational reservations for New Hampshire; and state and federal cooperation under the Clarke-McNary Bill. Friday, September 4, will be given over entirely to excursions, the feature being a trip up Mt. Chocorua over the Piper Trail, under the leadership of the members of the Chocorua Mountain Club.

